

Effecting Professional Unity

*J*ournal of Investigative Dermatology (*JID*) Editor-in-Chief Barbara Gilchrest and I have found ourselves in an unexpected situation this year—she as a former President of the Society for Investigative Dermatology (SID), currently serving as *JID* Editor, and I as former Editor of *JID*, currently serving as president of the SID. This situation has allowed us to continue our long-term collaboration, from Boston and Dallas, respectively, as supporters of the cutaneous biology enterprise. Dr. Gilchrest has continued the tradition of featuring a unique theme for each volume of *JID*, identifying 2013 as the “Year of Unity.” Editorials and journal covers over the past year have emphasized and reminded readers of that necessity. As President of the SID for most of the same year (May 2013 to May 2014), I chose at first to follow suit by emphasizing simple unity as part of the agenda for my year. It should be remembered that SID presidents serve for one year, meaning that holders of that responsibility should be careful to construct goals that can be accomplished within a reasonable amount of time or goals that will remain alive in succeeding years. My one-year term contrasts with terms of *JID* editors, who have five years to leave lasting records of achievement. This gave rise to my decision to collaborate on something important rather than to distract with something new.

However, in putting thoughts together for this Editorial, it became apparent that I was about to take Dr. Gilchrest’s emphasis in a somewhat different direction by including specific action steps beyond that of unity itself. After several exchanges about my very rough draft, she decided to continue the unity emphasis in 2014, but with an extension to “Unity in Action.” Her January editorial will explain her reasoning, and I now explain mine.

To begin the transition, I return to Dr. Gilchrest’s inaugural Editorial, in which she described “Goals of Unity” for 2013. It is these

goals that I have chosen to support by asking members of the SID to join her with participatory steps (Gilchrest, 2013):

Overall, the vision is of a single unified community, with the specific goals of each subgroup supported by the whole, to the benefit of all. I see these goals as interrelated: (i) enhancing our ability to prevent and treat skin disease through new knowledge; (ii) strengthening the investigative community responsible for these advances; (iii) communicating the relevance of research discoveries to the larger medical and scientific communities; and (iv) achieving optimal interactions among investigators, trainees, and other stakeholders worldwide.

As President of the SID, it is my responsibility to help guide the Society and at the same time to encourage its members to participate in (that is, to effect) its agenda. However, rather than discuss each element in Dr. Gilchrest’s agenda in sequence, I will cut across the four goals with recommendations that may address more than one at a time. This takes the form of suggestions of action for members of SID toward Unity in Action. Those who know me recognize that I prefer action to study and contemplation.

Join the political enterprise. We should not only communicate the relevance of our investigative successes to the greater scientific community but also communicate successes to our congressional representatives and, importantly, to the congressional aides in their offices. I encourage all of us to write to our congressional representatives, in both the House and the Senate, and then to take the next step by visiting them and their aides in local offices. Personal visits are much more effective than e-mail messages (which are nearly useless) and letters. Those who visit local offices might want to offer to serve in the future as “experts” when scientific questions arise. Keep in mind that congressional aides are commonly fresh out of college, and they do not stay long in those offices, meaning that there is a constant need

for new information and new scientific insight. When one goes back for a second visit, it is not uncommon for the aide representing science and technology to have gone on to a different responsibility or different employment. In supporting the need for sustained research funding, it is best to offer support for general initiatives of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) rather than one's own agenda or the agenda of one's institution. As citizens of our congressional districts and states, we are certainly free to do this. But there is an additional warning: do not go alone. When one visits an office alone, a common interpretation will be that one is advocating for one's own academic (or even financial) success. This is not good. To avoid this misunderstanding, take a patient with you. Invite the patient to enter the room first, let the patient discuss his issues and how he envisions that research may lead to novel therapies; let him discuss access to medical care and insurance issues. You, the scientist and/or clinical investigator, should serve as a source of information rather than as an advocate. Once questions are asked, you, the academic scientist, become the center of attention.

I have found that legislators and aides respond almost exclusively to patients who live in their districts rather than to investigators. Please note in the recommendation below my sustained interest in working with patient advocates. It is often useful for a representative of a local or national advocacy organization to take part as well. Even (and perhaps, especially) members of the SID who are not funded by the NIH or NSF should visit congressional offices, putting aside any possibility of conflict of interest. Toward the end of a visit, while speaking with an aide, I have even had the senator or representative come out to the meeting room to visit. You are a voter; the patient is a voter; the patient advocate is a voter; you will be heard.

Advocacy. Three years ago, when I was Editor of *JID*, we devoted one year (2010; volume 130) to patients and patient advocacy under the banner of "The Year of the Patient." We attempted to describe to the scientific world at large the burden that patients with skin disease bear. But the key element that year was the impact of patient advocacy organizations on the research enterprise. These organizations, such as the Cutaneous Eczema Foundation and the National Alopecia Areata Foundation, are highly organized and they support patient advocacy, creative research, and sources of information for patients. Moreover, 16 of the advocacy organizations have combined their efforts and resources in the collective organization now known as the Coalition of Skin Diseases. Member organizations of the Coalition pool their efforts while at the same time providing resources to meet their own interests.

As noted above, it is helpful for representatives of these organizations to visit legislative offices with you, either at home or on Capitol Hill in Washington. With much greater intensity than scientists can muster, they are able to describe patients' experiences, and they advocate much more effectively for the goals of the NIH and NSF.

But my action step goes beyond all of this. My strong recommendation is that members of our scientific community seek out national and local advocacy organizations and join them, with offers to serve in scientific capacities, including service on advisory boards. Indeed, many of our members have done this, but there is always need for additional help. Seek out your organization today. Join an advocacy organization related to the diseases that you study. Make yourself available as a consultant and/or a member of the advisory board.

Enhance your knowledge of science, culture, economics, and politics. Science is not conducted in a vacuum; rather, it occurs in society, among citizens. In addition to knowledge about art, music, history, and economics, one is able to navigate the academic enterprise more effectively with the perspective and wit that allows one to overcome the difficulties and disappointments that invariably accompany an academic scientific career. Closer to home, however, I have found that my ability to generate enthusiasm for new ideas and new directions occurs as I read cultural and scientific literature that is not related directly to my research. Thus, in addition to the journals that address issues relevant to their own careers, I encourage scientists, especially young scientists, to read more widely in the general medical and general scientific literature. Such reading commonly offers useful insight into disease pathogenesis and knowledge about new techniques and, most importantly, analogies to one's own work. My recommendation is that each of us should read at least the front half of *Science*, *Nature*, and *JAMA* each week. They are full of new ideas, and this exercise will offer considerable insight, not only into disease but also into the politics of medical investigation. Consider reading, as much as possible, *The New York Times* (especially Tuesday) or the *Washington Post* each day, *The Economist* weekly, *Scientific American* monthly, and a local city newspaper. No, you do not need to read every page of these publications; you select and you choose.

Finally, it is useful to develop and practice two- and four-minute speeches about your work. Then try them out on your neighbors and associates in your nonprofessional lives, for example, the lawyer or the engineer down the street. What do you do? Why do you do it? What is the rationale? So, how is this helpful? You never know when an audience may develop—with a potential donor at the end of a long clinic, in a congressional office, on the golf course with the friend of a colleague, or in the supermarket. Your enthusiasm for your work must tell them that you are excited about what you do; it is important to society at large, and you are going to tell them something about it. Stay in the teaching mode: friends, family members, colleagues on study sections, other physicians, and patients.

Give back. There are many ways to give back, including mentoring, but at this point I have only one recommendation: accept with some enthusiasm at least some of your invitations to review manuscripts for journals that publish articles in your area(s) of interest. This is payback. And then share that responsibility and experience with junior

colleagues. This is called mentoring. Let the trainee or junior colleague write the first draft of a review, and then use your corrections as a teaching exercise. Writing is the most important communication activity that we engage in. Not only is it a fundamental means of communication, but it is through examining your own written words that you can be certain that you understand a subject. "Write it down and you will learn whether you know what you are talking about."

Effecting the agenda. Rather than repeating the obvious, let me request that all readers now take these recommendations

and see how they address our Editor's Goals of Unity. I suggest that members of the SID should: (i) join the political enterprise, (ii) join and support advocacy organizations, (iii) enhance their knowledge of science, culture, economics, and politics, and (iv) give back through mentoring.

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REFERENCE

Gilchrest, BA (2013) The year of unity. *J Invest Dermatol* 133:1–3